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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 002521

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/22/2012

TAGS: PGOV NI

SUBJECT: SOLOMON LAR'S READOUT OF NIGERIA'S POLITICAL SCENE

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5(B & D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Chief Solomon Lar, a longtime Middle Belt politician and former Chairman of the PDP, told Ambassador on August 19 that President Obasanjo was in a strong position to win a second presidential term, even if facing Ibrahim Babangida. Lar also predicted that Obasanjo would be able to regain the support of the Tiv, one of the most numerous and important Middle Belt ethnic groups and still waiting for an apology from the President for the government's role in the recent army massacre in Benue State. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Perennial Plateau State politician Dr. Solomon Lar met with Ambassador and Poloff on August 19 and offered a snapshot of the Nigerian political scene, particularly on President Obasanjo's prospects for re-election. Responding to the Ambassador's question, Lar said that if former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) were Obasanjo's main opponent for the presidency, Obasanjo would emerge victorious. Lar speculated that Katsina and Sokoto states would support Obasanjo. He also thought that Kano, Kebbi and Kaduna would split between the two candidates, commenting that throughout northern Nigeria, IBB's sentimental support as a northerner would be tempered by the negative memories of his regime and transgressions against domestic interests in many areas.

¶3. (C) In his assessment of Obasanjo's prospects in the Middle Belt region, Lar was equally optimistic. He thought that Obasanjo, a Christian, would be able to appeal to the embattled feelings of Christians in the area. Further, Lar guaranteed that he would "deliver" the Tivs to the Obasanjo camp. He dismissed the resentment among the Tivs (stemming from the army's disastrous response to communal violence), saying that at the end of the day, they would come back to Obasanjo's PDP. Ambassador Jeter noted that the Tivs had demanded a public apology from the President, but Lar dismissed the demand without commenting on whether Obasanjo would offer one.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Lar has been involved in Middle Belt politics for decades, and even in his seventies is striving to remain relevant in a society which is searching for fresh faces. His relocation to Abuja, away from his power base in Plateau State, is an indication of the lengths he will go in order to remain at the center of action and is a possible sign of the weakening of his support among the younger generation of Middle Belt politicos. Whether or not he remains a relevant player on the regional scene, Lar's assessment of Obasanjo's prospects is influenced by his closeness to the Presidency and his efforts to convince it of his own importance.

JETER